Children's perceptions and attitudes about aging and older adults are investigated using a version of Children's Views on Aging (CVoA), a four-part validated instrument designed to assess school-age children's views on older adults and aging. The instrument has been adapted to enable children to make value judgements about their responses to questions on the CVoA. The study reports children's perceptions and attitudes about aging are not as negative as adults conclude. Children are positively affected by interactions with older adults, they describe physical signs of aging without judgement, and respond negatively to some of the unpleasant conditions associated with aging.
Key Words: Older adult resources, Intergenerational interaction, Children's attitudes

Children's Views on Aging: Their Attitudes and Values[1]

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As more and more people live longer and healthier lives, and the number of older adults increases, it is incumbent upon society to reflect upon the nature and genesis of the attitudes and perceptions of its younger people toward older adults. With their numbers increasing, older adults are becoming actively involved in many aspects of community life (Newman, 1985). While their numbers may be large, older adults are often the focus of negative social attitudes, which makes them vulnerable to a form of prejudice known as ageism (Falchikov, 1990; Seefeldt, Jantz, Galper, & Serock, 1977). Laws (1995) argues that age should be studied as a component of a complex framework of social relations between individuals. Ageism can be defined as a set of social practices. Laws suggests that society has transformed biological and chronological age into social and cultural signs. Thus, perceived differences between young and old people are socially constructed, and are not necessarily reducible to biological causes. How a culture views age, therefore, is often based upon socially/culturally agreed upon standards. Researchers have been interpreting results from children using adult standards. The question is: is there a need to be more sensitive to children's socially/culturally derived standards in the context of interpreting their responses?

How are children's attitudes about and perceptions of older adults formed? The answer to this question is complex. Marks, Newman, and Onawola (1985) used the Children's Views on Aging (CVoA) questionnaire to demonstrate the complexity and diversity of children's attitudes toward older adults. They found that, although children's attitudes toward the aging process were often negative, their general attitudes about older adults were positive. Marks and colleagues concluded that children appear to recognize the positive and negative aspects of aging. Beyond making this distinction, the children displayed appropriate affective responses to each aspect of the aging process and to older people. Based upon their research, Marks et al. have suggested the need to look beyond children's attitudes and at the underlying components of those attitudes.

By the time children enter school they may have already developed negative attitudes toward some older adults. Research on the development of such attitudes may help in modifying them before they become well established (Isaacs & Bearison, 1986). Though older adults as a group may be perceived in a negative light, individual older adults within that aggregate may be perceived either positively or negatively. McTavish (1971) has found that negative perceptions can result in an overall rejection of older adults. McTavish argues that children fear growing old because of their misconception that aging is bad. Children's attitudes and stereotypes develop early and remain fairly constant, guiding their behavior toward others (Klausmeier & Ripple, 1971). As Aronson (1976) reminds us, attitudes are resistant to change, and people will go to great lengths to maintain them.

While much of the literature on this issue reports empirical support for the notion that children and young people hold negative stereotypes about older adults, there is a body of research that indicates no significant differences in attitudes between the young and the old, and some report positive perceptions of older adults (Puckett, Petty, Cacioppo, & Fisher, 1983). For example, Fillmer (1984) asked children to react to pictures of young and old people. When a semantic differential scale was used, children's attitudes tended to be more positive toward older adults than towards young people. However, using a Likert-scale, Fillmer found children's attitudes toward older adults to be more negative. While it is essential that we understand the nature and structure of children's beliefs about older adults, owing to the conflicting findings of past research, it is equally important to examine the methodologies employed. It is possible that the methodologies utilized and measurement instruments used influenced the results reported by researchers (Kite & Johnson, 1988). For example, Marks et al. (1985), in their study of children's views of aging, found diversity among children's attitudes toward older adults. From open-ended evaluations, negative perceptions about the aging process emerged; however, when a semantic differential scale was used, children's responses about older persons were relatively positive, suggesting that the children in this study have concerns about "growing old" rather than about older persons.

Kite and Johnson (1988), in their meta-analysis of the literature on the attitudes of children toward older and younger adults, found that attitudes are complex; they are composed of conceptually different domains and are multivariately determined. It is presumed that attitudes guide behavior; thus, one could predict behavior by understanding the attitudes that underlie it. Essential to the formation of attitudes are beliefs, for they serve as an "information base" (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, p. 14). Fishbein and Ajzen suggest that new beliefs are built upon prior beliefs through various inference processes.

The beliefs one has about a person or object underlie the formation of attitudes about the person or object. Thus, an individual's attitude toward a person or object is based on beliefs held about particular characteristics or attributes (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) of the person or object. For example, an eight-year-old girl may adopt a negative attitude toward older adults if her beliefs about older people are connected to negative attributes. According to Fishbein and Ajzen, beliefs and attitudes are not necessarily consistent. For example, this same eight-year-old may hold various beliefs about older adults and growing old, some favorable and some not, which will affect the way in which she interacts with older adults. Thus, attitudes can be characterized by their dualistic nature: thinking and emotional feeling. Attitudes and beliefs come together to form a complex framework that serves many functions for individuals. Therefore, it is possible for people to have a variety of beliefs about older adults. Kite and John-

son (1988) argue that research must be undertaken that will describe and explain the complexity of attitudes toward older adults, and how attitudes influence behavior.

Owing to the complexity and the multidimensional quality of attitudes, McTavish (1971) argued that the total context in which the young and the old interact must be taken into account. Seefeldt, Jantz, Galper, and Serock (1977) investigated three related components of children's attitudes toward aging and older adults. The components explored were cognition, affect, and behavior. Seefeldt et al. investigated children's knowledge of age, the various types of interaction and behaviors they displayed toward older adults, and their feelings about older adults and the aging process. To this end, Seefeldt and colleagues used a picture series and structured interviews. One hundred eighty children were selected in groups of twenty from each of two school levels (nursery school and grade school levels K through 6). Each of these children was shown four pictures of one man as he aged from 20 years to 80 years. The interviews were aimed at exploring children's ability to identify the oldest man in the pictures and the criteria used to make that identification. After being shown a picture of an 80-year-old man, the children were asked what it would be like to be old. The types of helping behaviors and interactions between young and old were also explored. Children were also asked which of the men they preferred spending time with. Seefeldt et al. also sought to explore children's concepts of age and whether they could arrange the pictures chronologically. Finally, children were asked to assign ages to the men in the pictures. This study indicated that 165 of the 180 (91.6%) children selected and interviewed understood the concept of being old. First graders were able to put the pictures in correct sequence, youngest to oldest. Observable physical characteristics of aging were found to be crucial factors that influenced children's choice of the oldest man.

In previous studies, children's perceptions of aging and older adults were interpreted by adult researchers. It is essential that research begin to assess the values and importance children themselves place upon older adults and aging. Falchikov (1990) analyzed children's drawings of young and old people to ascertain their ideas about aging and older adults. Employing various modes of data analyses, Falchikov found that boys' drawings of young women and girls' pictures of old men were stereotypical. The pictures of older adults were no more stereotyped than pictures of young people, but did contain more negative content, and pictures of older adults were significantly smaller than pictures of young people. While Falchikov acknowledges the simplicity of the methodology employed, it does provide some insights into the way in which children think about aging.

Falchikov (1990) was able to show the various ways that children conceptualize aging. To understand fully children's perceptions of the negative and positive characteristics of aging, it is important

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to allow children to express the value(s) they place upon their own aging, and the aging of others. It is equally important to understand the genesis of children's attitudes toward aging. For example, how do children learn about aging and older adults? Do they learn about aging and older adults through the media, including television and movies? Or is their knowledge based on personal experience with an older adult, a grandparent or other older adult? What is the nature of their interaction with older adults, and how is that reflected in their attitudes? The aim of this study is to allow children to express the perceptions they have of aging and older adults, and to better understand what value they place upon these perceptions.

Subjects

Seventy-one fourth- and fifth-grade students completed the Children's Views on Aging (CVOA) Questionnaire. These students were participants in a program that brought older adults into their classrooms on a weekly basis to serve as resource persons. Forty-eight females and 23 males responded on the pretest, and 46 females and 25 males responded on the post-test. These children are from predominately low socioeconomic backgrounds, and live in three economically depressed communities in southwestern Pennsylvania. These formerly thriving communities have experienced economic reversal with the sharp decline in the steel industry. The children are predominately African-American, reflecting the racial distribution of the communities in which they live. The elementary schools they attend are all located within thirty miles of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Method

The Children's Views of Aging (CVoA) is a validated instrument designed to yield information on the attitudes of children toward the aging process and older people, and to help determine the impact of intergenerational programs on these attitudes. The CVoA is designed to be administered on a pre-test/post-test schedule. It contains four sections with a variety of open-ended questions. Section I asks the children to think about becoming an old person and to answer nine open-ended questions regarding their perceptions of aging (i.e., "how it feels to be old"). The children are then asked whether they judge their response "a good thing to happen," "a bad thing to happen" or "neither good nor bad." Section II asks for information regarding the frequency and nature of grandparent contact and the ages of grandparents. Section III asks the child questions related to having an older person in the classroom, what the child believes the older person might or could do with them in the classroom, and the child's perceptions of why older adults want to participate in the classroom. Section IV lists twelve bipolar word pairs that describe characteristics of older adults in a semantic differential scale and asks the child to indicate what characteristics they as-

cribe to older people (i.e., good/bad, pleasant/unpleasant, mean/kind, etc.).

The CVoA was administered in classrooms by a graduate student from Generations Together. There were approximately 20 to 30 children in each classroom. Depending upon the reading ability of the children, questions would either be read aloud by the graduate student or children would read and answer each question individually. In two cases the CVOA was administered in the school cafeteria after school with children seated at lunch tables.

Results

The following summarizes the responses to a subset of items from Sections I and II of both the pre-test and post-test questionnaires. The pre-test was administered before older adults became weekly volunteers in the classroom. The post-test was administered several months after older adults had been a consistent weekly presence in the classroom. These items were chosen because they provide examples of some recurring themes in children's attitudes about the aging process that were noted in their response on the CVoA. For example, when asked how they can tell when people are growing old, 80% of the children listed physical attributes such as graying hair and wrinkles, 5% identified loss of sight, hearing, and memory. Other responses related to observable physical disabilities and decreased activities (15%). A small number (6%) reported a change in personality, while most focused upon the physical changes that may occur with age: loss of hair, graying of hair, and so forth. When children were asked if they thought the changes were good, bad or neither good nor bad, 20% said it was "good," 30% said that it was "bad," and 50% said that it was "neither good nor bad." Children tend to perceive observable aspects of aging in the context of physical characteristics without placing a value on these characteristics.

When asked how they thought it felt to be an old person, children's responses ranged from thinking it would be fun and good (12%) to scary, weird, and lonely (35%). These responses mirror the responses children gave when asked how they will feel when they are old. The responses to this latter question ranged from good, happy, and fine to bad, lonely, and sad. However, there was an added condition related to some of the responses, such as worn out, in pain, sick, and helpless (30%). When asked whether they thought this was good, bad, or neither good nor bad, 19% said it was "good," 46% said it was "bad," and 33% said it was "neither good nor bad." Children seem to understand the complexity of the aging process and the feelings that accompany the unpleasant conditions associated with aging. It would appear that while the children did not view the aging process as negative, when asked to describe how it would feel to be old, almost half of them expressed negative impressions of some conditions they related to being old. The children's perceptions of physical and other manifestations of

aging (i.e., wrinkles, use of canes, etc.) were not viewed as negative. However, perceptions of their own aging process reflects a negative view of some conditions associated with this process. In summation, while these children do not seem to view old people in a negative way, they anticipate some negative conditions as they become old. This distinction is essential to our understanding of children's overriding perceptions of this stage of life. Children's appreciation of the complexity of aging reflects a more realistic perception of this stage of life than adults may have expected.

Children responded that when a person gets old, they die or go to a nursing home (18%) or they get sick and weak and cannot do things (43%). Others said that old people become grandparents (6%). Some said that old people do fun and exciting things (11%). Asked what they will do when they are old, these children said they would sit around, watch TV, and play games (32%). A small number said that they would go to a nursing or retirement home or die (6%). Other responses provided by the children reflected a sense of maintaining a certain level of activity and involvement with others in the form of work (7%) and recreation (21%). When asked whether they thought this was good, bad, or neither good nor bad, 19% said it was "good," 47% said it was "bad," and 33% said it was "neither good nor bad." These responses are consistent with those of the previous question. It appears that the children have some negative perceptions about how it feels to be old and some of the conditions associated with being old. However, these feelings do not seem to transfer to their feelings *about* older people.

When asked where or from whom they learned most about old persons, most of the children said they learned about old people from their grandparents (62%). The next most frequent source of information was from parents (22%). Other sources of information included TV, movies, books, and friends (8%).

In Section II, 95% of the children reported having grandparents. Children reported a mean age of 66 years for grandfathers and 63 years for grandmothers. Most of the children (69%) said that their grandparents are the oldest people they know, and most reported seeing them daily or weekly (72%). The children reported engaging in indoor (30%) and outdoor (39%) activities with their grandparents when they are with them. Some of the children (21%) said they talk with their grandparents and have fun with them. It is interesting to note that children's relationship with their grandparents do not generalize to "all old people." Grandparents are typically seen as a "special persons" whose behaviors and characteristics are unique to the family constellation.

The children's responses are interesting in several respects. It is notable that when asked how "old" people felt about being old and how they thought they would feel when they are old, the responses were very similar and ranged from negative — weird and sad, to positive — good and great. Also of inter-est are the responses to the question "How you can tell when someone is old?" Many of the responses focused on functional characteristics such as decreased activity and physical characteristics of aging such as gray hair or baldness. A few children reported that an individual's personality may change with age. The breadth of responses to the question "What happens when a person gets old?" is notable. There is a wide range of responses, including going to a nursing or retirement home or dying, to doing fun and exciting things. When asked what they will do when they are old, the children responded similarly, with some responses reflecting a desire to remain active and to be involved with other people. It would appear that children display a wide range of perceptions about aging and its consequences. They do not appear to view the physical changes as overwhelmingly negative. At the same time, they seem to have more negative expectations on how it will feel to actually be old and what will happen to them as a result of being old. They do not report viewing the aging of others as negative.

Section III of the CVoA focuses on the children's perception of the presence and roles of older adults in the classroom. A comparison of pre- and post-test responses on selected representative items from Section III of CVoA is reported in the following tables.

Item:

Why do you think an old person would visit your classroom? (see Table 1)

Item:

Would you like having an old person in your classroom as a helper? (see Table 2)

Pre- and post-participation responses did not show great differences. Perceptions that the older adults wanted to teach and help children remained very positive from pre-test to post-test. Slightly more children at the time of the post-test thought that the older adults came to their classroom because they liked children. After participation, fewer children thought that the older adults were there because they wanted to feel useful. On the post-

Table 1 Childrens' Attributions of Reasons Why Elders Visit Their Classrooms

	Pre-test %			Post-test %		
Reason	Yes	No	Don't Know	Yes	No	Don't Know
To teach children	83	3	14	81	4	15
To help children	88	3	9	89	3	8
Because they like children	67	8	25	72	4	24
To make them feel useful	55	19	26	42	24	34
They are lonely	44	27	29	48	19	33
They have nothing else to do	19	48	33	24	32	44

Table 2. Desirability of the Presence of an Older Adult Aide

Pre-test %			Post-test %		
Yes	No	Don't Know	Yes	No	Don't Know
84	8	8	89	4	7

test, slightly more children reported thinking that the older adults came to their classrooms because they were lonely, and that they had nothing interesting to do.

When asked if they wanted an older adult in their classroom as a helper, more children said 'yes' on the post-test questionnaire. This change reflects an increase of 6%, from 83% on the pre-test to 89% on the post-test, indicating a positive reaction of children to the interaction with the older adult volunteer.

Section IV of the CVoA addresses children's perceptions of older adults using selected bipolar word pairs of characteristics drawn from the Osgood semantic differential scale. The children identify along a 5-point Likert-type scale their rating of older people's characteristics. In general, there is a marked positive shift along a 5-point rating scale in perception of "old people" after older adults had been present weekly in the classrooms as school volunteers. Table 3 summarizes the percentage of positive change in student responses from pre-test to post-test for selected characteristics.

In general, ratings were more positive after interaction with the older adults. In addition, the data suggest that the descriptions tended toward "very" positive on the post-test. For most descriptors, the percentage of "very" positive change ranged from about 10–20%.

Some incremental increases in negative descriptions were also documented. However, the percentage of change as well as the strength of the descriptions was substantially less than for the positive results. For example, a small increase (7%) from pre-test to post-test is observed for the descriptor "boring." At the same time, a 15% increase is observed on the other end of the scale for "interesting." The small increases in negative descriptors were in all cases more than offset by change on the positive end of the scale. Other descriptors for which a small increase on the negative side was offset by the percentage of positive change were: slow, mean, and hated. It should be stressed that negative increases were incremental and tended to appear in the "a little" category. Observed changes were generally positive.

In addition to these findings, some other differences were noted. For example, when the percentage of students who responded "not sure" decreased from pre-test to post-test, the greatest corresponding increase was observed in the positive or very positive category. In other words, if the students were "not sure" whether they would "describe old people" as "good" at the time of the pre-test, the percentage who were "not sure" at the time of the post-test was

Table 3. Adjectives That Children Endorsed to Describe Older Adults

	Pre-test %		Post-test %	
Adjective	Very Much*	Very Little+	Very Much	Very Little
Good	60	4	80	0
Pleasant	47	10	64	4
Happy	59	12	68	8
Fast	5	20	7	16
Pretty	27	29	36	24
Interesting	58	14	72	4
Kind	55	12	68	4
Loved	52	8	64	8

Note: *,+Very Much and Very Little were used as the extreme values of a five-point rating scale. Not included in the table are counts for intermediate values; we merely wish to describe the shift. We cannot designate the ends of the scale as either positive or negative because we discovered that the children themselves do not perceive their own ratings in that way.

substantially lower and the positive attribution increased proportionately. Those who were uncertain tended to give more positive descriptions of older adults after they had participated in the school volunteer program.

Summary

The results of pre-test and post-test administration of the CVoA, including differences between pre-test and post-test, show a shift in childrens' feelings about their responses to a more positive value. Children who were previously unsure of the emotional quality of their responses have shifted from "not sure" in pre-test measures to "good" or better in post-test measures. The typical child in this study tends to have positive perceptions of older people, but negative feelings about his or her own aging. They have a realistic and consistent perception of why older adults work with them in the classroom. There is little change in their understanding of the reasons why older adults serve as classroom volunteers between the pre-test and post-test.

Children in this study identify physical changes due to aging, and do not have a negative perception of them. Previous reports of childrens' negative perceptions of the physical aging process may have been prompted more by the attributions and interpretations of the research than by concrete evidence gathered from the children themselves. They consistently identified positive affective characteristics associated with aging, which were clearly demonstrated in their responses to the semantic differential scale. The children accurately and consistently identified the reasons why older adults came to their classrooms, and that they and their classmates generally felt good about their presence. The children in this study tend to associate their negative feelings with some conditions accompanying the aging process, and they tend to attribute the same feelings about aging to the older adults as well.

Overall, these children had positive perceptions of and emotional responses to older people. This study is important because it provides adults with new insights into children's perceptions of aging through the child's own values. It demonstrates the value of interpreting a child's responses using the child's own values rather than interpreting children's responses using adult values.

This study, therefore, differs from earlier studies in which researchers assigned adult values to their interpresentation of children's responses without consulting the children on how they valued their responses.

Implications for Further Research

It appears from this study that children are positively affected by their interactions with older adults, have a realistic perception of the aging process, and can place a value on their perception. Intergenerational interaction is shown to further enhance positive perceptions of aging. This study suggests the importance of involving children in articulating their values. Professionals may be cautioned not to infer adult interpretations to the responses of children, but rather to gain insight on children's perceptions from the children themselves.

The complexities associated with children's multidimensional responses to aging and older persons requires that researchers provide more accurate interpretations of their findings through the use of children's and youth's values and interpretations of their own responses.

With the consistent increase nationally of intergenerational programs involving children, youth and older adults, it is essential that we understand the impact of these programs on our children and youth in the context of the cross-generational outcome behaviors and attitudes.

This study presents additional insights related to the anticipated outcomes of intergenerational programs, a social phenomenon whose intent is to positively impact the behaviors and attitudes of our country's young and old.

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